

CITY GOVERNMENT BY COMMISSION: A REPORT¹

THE committee finds itself in agreement on the following interpretations of features of commission government.

MAJOR FEATURES

1. *Commission government is a relative success* as compared with the older forms. The people who live under it are generally more content. They feel that they are more effective politically and that commission government is an asset to their town. Substantial financial improvements have generally resulted, demonstrating a striking increase in efficiency and a higher standard of municipal accomplishment, and this may fairly be credited to the better working of the new plan.

2. This relative success of commission government *results primarily because it is more democratic* (i.e., sensitive to public opinion), than the old form. Among the features which undoubtedly are responsible for this increased sensitiveness are

a. Its "unification of powers" as contrasted with the old undesirable "separation of powers." The commission having all the power, has no one to blame for failure to please the public, cannot evade full responsibility, and having ample power to remedy each abuse, can be held responsible for any failure to do so. This stripping away of the old time protective confusion-of-responsibility exposes the commission to the direct fire of public opinion and makes its members personally targets for public criticism. The unification of powers unifies the whole governmental system, gives the government the single controlling brain which is necessary to a successful organism, prevents lost motion, "pulling and hauling," deadlocks, and ill feeling.

b. The short ballot. This makes each elective official conspicuous on election day and after; makes intelligent voting so easy that practically every citizen can vote intelligently without any more conscious effort than he expended on his business of citizenship under the old plan. The short ballot simplifies the whole work of citizenship so much that the citizens can handle their political affairs without employing a political machine

¹A special committee of the National Municipal League, consisting of William Bennett Munro, of Columbia, Prof. Charles A. Beard, of Columbia, Dr. Ernest S. Bradford of Washington, Clinton Rogers Woodruff, Philadelphia, Editor The NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, and Richard S. Childs, secretary of The Short Ballot Organization, was appointed before the Richmond meeting to plan an analysis of commission government for discussion. The report of this committee as presented at the meeting is embodied in this article.

as an intermediary political instrument. The short ballot in small cities makes the politician and his machine superfluous, and thereby substitutes for the old oligarchy of political experts a democracy in which the entire populace participate.

Being acutely sensitive and therefore anxious to please, commission government has been giving the people better government because the people are and always have been ready to applaud honest and progressive government. A contributing factor undoubtedly is the fact that the radical change has usually awakened a fresh civic interest among the citizens, which runs along of its own momentum for a considerable time and does much to tone up every branch of administration.

Commission government could reasonably be expected to succeed with these features (unification of powers and the short ballot) alone, and no new city charter should ever be classified as true commission government which lacks these essentials.

OTHER FEATURES

3. *Non-partisan ballot.* The non-partisan method of election is highly desirable, but not absolutely indispensable, as the short ballot by making the party label a superfluous convenience, thereby destroys much of the label's influence anyway.

4. *The initiative and referendum-by-protest* have proved useful as provisions for allaying the time honored popular fear of entrusting large powers to single bodies. The sensitiveness of commission government reduces the necessity for these devices and instances of their use in commission governed cities are very uncommon. It should not be forgotten that Galveston and Houston, the first two cities to have the plan, made their success without these features. They have not proved dangerous or susceptible to misuse.

5. *The recall* is a desirable, but not indispensable extension and modification of the right to elect. We have no evidence that it has been misused. In several cases it seems to have been employed to good advantage. Under the sensitive commission plan it is less needed than with the old plan, and is more practical.

6. *The abolition of ward lines* is desirable in small cities, and has been generally welcomed as putting an end to numerous petty abuses. It tends to prevent petty log-rolling and emphasizes the unity of the city. Its importance, however, has been generally over-estimated, for there are many cities (Galveston, before the flood, being one), where ward lines have been abolished without developing any appreciable or permanent reform.

7. It is unsound and therefore unwise to make the commission *auditor* of its own accounts. This does not necessarily involve the independent election of a city auditor in all cities. Some authority, such as the gover-

nor, could appoint a State officer with power to investigate the accounts of all cities and to make his reports public. This is in line with the National Municipal League's familiar demand for uniform municipal accounting and reporting.

8. It is unsound to give the commission control over the *civil service commission* as in Des Moines, unless the civil service commission be given a protected and long tenure of office and rotation of appointment. The civil service commission might better be appointed by some remote authority, such as the governor.

9. *Mayor's veto.* It is doubtful whether the mayor should have a veto over his confrères, or in fact any added powers, lest he overshadow the other commissioners and attract the limelight at their expense, leaving them in obscurity where the people cannot intelligently and justly criticise and control them.

APPLICABILITY TO DIFFERENT SIZED CITIES

10. Commission government is in general to be recommended *for cities of 100,000 population* and under, and *possibly* also for cities of much larger size in preference to any other plan now in operation in any American city.

The maximum size which may wisely adopt the commission plan without any modification cannot as yet be established, as too few large cities have tried it.

The foregoing represents matters on which the whole committee substantially agrees.

The following are questions on which the committee did not agree and as practically all our work was done by correspondence it was impossible for the members to reason with each other and reach a conclusion. These matters are therefore submitted without conclusions in the form of subjects for further debate with a brief for each side.

11. *Should the election-at-large feature be retained in the case of very large cities?*

Yes. The abolition of the ward system in Boston brought excellent results in the composition of the council and is credited with having accomplished more in the way of breaking down the influence of the machine than any other feature of the new charter.

No. As the size of an electorate increases, the expense and difficulty of conducting campaigns for the office increases also, until they reach a scale where individual candidatures are balked and the support of an experienced political machine, as contrasted with that of a newly improvised machine, becomes so important to the success of a candidate as to give to existing machines a safe option in the choice of hopeful candidates. Officials when elected will thus be indebted to the machine, and the machines share

with the people in the control over the government which ought to belong to the people alone. If machines are to be abolished as influences in municipal politics, their monopoly must be broken and free competition established, and this can only be done by creating conditions under which electioneering machinery, adequate for the task, can be improvised in case the established organizations are insufficiently deferential to public opinion. For large cities, therefore, the commission plan should be changed to something more like the English or German plan of government by a ward-elected council of popular representatives, or possibly a plan of proportional representation could be worked that would be better yet. The requirement of residence in the district should be abolished.

12. *Should the size of the commission be radically enlarged in the case of very large cities?*

Yes. Five men are too few to represent the varied elements of a great population and will be too far from the people to be able to analyze public opinion by direct contact. The commission should therefore be enlarged but in a manner which will retain the short ballot. For moderate sized cities, the choice of only a part of the commission at a time would help, but in the larger cities a sub-division of the people by ward divisions or proportional representation seems advisable.

That a large body is not fitted for executive work is admitted (though such government succeeds in British cities) but the executive function can be delegated to a compact appointive committee, or, better, to an appointive chief executive as in German cities and in the so-called "Lockport (N. Y.) Plan."

No. The existence of the initiative, referendum and recall would be sufficient to keep any city government in touch with popular opinion.

The business of city government is almost wholly executive. The commission should therefore be an executive body first and last.

The theory that for very large cities the commission should be enlarged, is erroneous, since based on the belief that the greater the number of men, the better the representation, which does not follow. The enlargement of the commission is incompatible with the short ballot, unnecessary beyond seven or nine members and preferably five or less, and tends toward the same confusion and irresponsibility so prevalent under the present council system.

13. *Should the individual commissioners each be executive heads of departments?*

Yes. This feature is incidental to the "unification of powers" and a method of combining legislative and administrative control in the same body. Under many charters the commission is the legislative body, and *individually* the members of the commission, being each the head of a department, constitute the administrative force. The commission is not

a body of experts but a board of general managers whose oversight and general direction is required but who are to hire the experts and technical men for the various positions needed. It is not essential that the commission should be a true reflection of the population; but it is important that they (the commission) act for the entire population and represent it in the sense of looking after the welfare of the whole city. An advisory board consisting of laboring men, reformers, business men, some women, and all the other elements of the population might be a desirable help to a city governing body in formulating its course of action; but the real work must be done by a few men and these should be the commission.

There is no more danger of intrusting the individual commissioner with the carrying-out of the will of his confrères on the commission than of trusting the president of a corporation to carry out the will of the board of directors of which he is a voting member.

No. The feature of the usual plan which makes the elected officers' administrative heads is unsound (except in the smallest cities where the communal work is of so simple a nature that it may safely be entrusted to any man of general common sense). Where the city work is considerable and technical, the requirements that elective officers shall be competent to perform executive duties is a denial of accurate representation to many large classes of the community, for the requirements practically attempt to limit the people to the selection of members of the employer class. Experts and executives cannot be effectively selected by popular vote, and their choice is not a natural popular function. The interest of the people is in representation. The commission should be a true reflection of the population. In a city with a large laboring class, the commission should contain a due proportion of laboring men, and in the natural desire for such representation *the people will elect such men anyway* regardless of their unfitness by experience for large administrative work.²

² The discussion of this report was somewhat curtailed at the meeting. Numerous questions were hurled at the chairman, but the fire was cut short before any real heat had developed. The tone of the discussion indicated a very general agreement with the conclusions of the committee.

At the round table luncheon, which followed, there was substantial disagreement by Admiral Chadwick of Newport, who challenged the commission plan for its failure to give adequate representation and upheld in preference the Newport plan which provides for an elective council of 195 members, chosen thirteen from each ward, who meet monthly, debate city affairs and instruct the other elective officers, who consist of a mayor and five aldermen constituting the administrative side of the city.

In general the trend of the discussion was to the effect that the commission was by no means the ultimate form of American municipal government, but a transitional form which was destined to lead on to the wholesale cleaning up of myriad ancient abuses.

It is obvious that the National Municipal League can do splendid service in watching commission government, giving warning promptly of any weaknesses that may

CITY GOVERNMENT BY COMMISSION

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LIST OF CITIES ADOPTING A COMMISSION FORM OF GOVERNMENT IN
1911

NEW ENGLAND DIVISION

MAINE

Gardiner.....	5,311'
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MASSACHUSETTS

Lawrence.....	
Lowell.....	Charter..... 106,294

NEW JERSEY

Hawthorne.....	State Law.....	3,400
Irvington.....	State Law.....	11,877
Margate.....	State Law.....	129
Ocean City.....	State Law.....	1,950
Passaic.....	State Law.....	54,773
Ridgewood.....	State Law.....	5,416
Trenton.....	State Law.....	96,815
Wallington.....	State Law.....	3,448

SOUTH ATLANTIC DIVISION

WEST VIRGINIA

Parkersburg.....	Charter.....	17,842
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NORTH CAROLINA

Greensboro.....	Charter.....	15,895
Wilmington.....	Charter.....	25,748

GEORGIA

Cartersville.....	State Law.....	4,067
Marietta.....		

FLORIDA

Green Cove Springs
Passe a Grille

develop so that they can be corrected before the plan in general gets discredit, and making plain by analysis the real essential merits of the plan to the end that they may not be overlooked and dropped out as the plan spreads.

The commission plan spread its wings over a 10 per cent increase of population as a result of various elections and referenda on November 7, the total population of the cities under the plan now being 3,894,173.

The following list was prepared by the Editor of the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW in coöperation with the officers of the Short Ballot Organization.

ILLINOIS

Braceville.....	State Law adopted by city.....	
Carbondale.....	State Law adopted by city.....	5,600
Clinton.....	State Law adopted by city.....	5,165
Decatur.....	State Law adopted by city.....	31,140
Dixon.....	State Law adopted by city.....	7,216
Elgin.....	State Law adopted by city.....	25,976
Forest Park		
Hamilton.....	State Law adopted by city.....	1,627
Hillsboro.....	State Law adopted by city.....	3,424
Jacksonville.....	State Law adopted by city.....	15,326
Kewanee.....	State Law adopted by city.....	9,307
Moline.....	State Law adopted by city.....	24,199
Ottawa.....	State Law adopted by city.....	9,535
Pekin.....	State Law adopted by city.....	9,897
Rochelle.....	State Law adopted by city.....	2,732
Rock Island.....	State Law adopted by city.....	24,335
Springfield.....	State Law adopted by city.....	51,617
Spring Valley.....	State Law adopted by city.....	7,035
Stirling.....	State Law adopted by city.....	7,467
Waukegan.....	State Law adopted by city.....	16,069

MICHIGAN

East Jordan.....	Home Rule Law.....	2,516
Fremont.....	Home Rule Law.....	
Pontiac.....	Home Rule Law.....	14,532
Wyandotte.....	Home Rule Law.....	8,287

WISCONSIN

Oshkosh

WEST NORTH CENTRAL DIVISION

MINNESOTA

Faribault.....	Home Rule Charter under State Law.....	9,001
St. Cloud		

SOUTH DAKOTA

Lead.....		8,392
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KANSAS

Chanute
 Manhattan
 Pratt

NEBRASKA

Beatrice		
Omaha.....	State Law.....	

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WEST SOUTH CENTRAL DIVISION

KENTUCKY

Lexington.....	35,099
Newport.....	

TENNESSEE

Chattanooga.....	44,604
Knoxville.....Special Charter.....	36,346
St. Elmo.....Charter.....	2,426

ALABAMA

Birmingham.....State Law.....	132,685
Cordova.....State Law.....	1,747
Gulfport.....	
Hartselle.....State Law.....	1,374
Huntsville.....State Law.....	7,611
Mobile.....State Law.....	51,521
Montgomery.....State Law.....	38,136
Talladega.....State Law.....	5,854
Tuscaloosa.....State Law.....	8,407

MISSISSIPPI

Clarksdale.....	4,079
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OKLAHOMA

El Reno.....Home Rule Charter.....	7,872
Guthrie.....Home Rule Charter.....	11,654
Holdenville.....Home Rule Charter.....	
Lawton.....Home Rule Charter.....	7,788
Oklahoma City.....Home Rule Charter.....	64,205
Stillwater.....Home Rule Charter.....	3,444

TEXAS

Port Arthur

MOUNTAIN DIVISION

MONTANA

Missoula.....State Law.....	12,869
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WYOMING

Sheridan.....State Law.....	7,522
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UTAH

Logan.....	
Murray.....State Law.....	4,057
Ogden.....State Law.....	25,580
Provo.....State Law.....	8,925
Salt Lake City.....State Law.....	92,777

PACIFIC DIVISION

WASHINGTON

Centralia.....	
Chehalis.....	4,507
Hoquiam.....	8,171
North Yakima.....	14,082
Spokane.....Home Rule Charter.....	104,402
Walla Walla.....Home Rule Charter.....	19,364

CALIFORNIA

Monterey.....Home Rule Charter.....	4,923
Sacramento.....Home Rule Charter.....	
San Luis Obispo.....Home Rule Charter.....	5,157
Santa Cruz.....Home Rule Charter.....	11,146
Stockton.....Home Rule Charter.....	
Vallejo.....Home Rule Charter.....	11,340